

Vignettes of the Banal

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I often picture myself telling my daughter the story of how her father died. It does not begin with an illness or a corpse. Rather, it is the story of a curse passed down from generation to generation of women in my family — one that allows us the sanctuary of deep and fulfilling love, but only temporarily. This curse, a mystical force in my love life, has taken the great loves of my mother, my mother's mother, and her mother's mother. When we found out my daughter's father, the great love of my life, was sick, I reached deep into the genesis of my being and pulled out a story that has pulsed through my subconscious since I was a child.

We've never met, but your arrival is my only concern. I don't know at what hour you will come, as I wait in a different country for your point of entry. When I close my eyes I imagine the sound, timbre, and cadence of your first cry. What will you think of these stars that glow in our nighttime sky? What will you remember of me? How long will those songs that I sang to you while you were in your mother's womb remain? I wish you knew my story, the path that I travelled, shaping me into the man that I've become — the hurt and loss of being born on the wrong side of the divide that continues to haunt even in the silent moments of pain. I've never asked for much, expected even less. But to you, I ask for the stars and moon and all the empty spaces in-between. I bestow and burden you with a request: Wait for me. Wait for this distance to vanish. And when you lay your eyes upon me, think not stranger, but rather, father.

I am Dean Caivano. I am doing my best to sound masculine as this insurance representative apologizes profusely for mistaking me for a woman. She asks me a series of questions to authenticate my identity. *Franco*, I tell her. I only know Dean's mother's maiden name because I wrote it down earlier today. We discover that Dean has been without health insurance in Canada for a year because Human Resources flipped his birth month and his birth day when he enrolled and they have since been virtually unreachable. The office is on a far end of York University's campus behind a locked door. The woman gives me instructions about how to rectify this issue.

[It's Franco.]

Hey, I'm Sarah. Did you go to Lehigh?

No, brown isn't my color. I wore blue across the river.

I am Dean Caivano. I mumble to a disinterested graduate student also sitting in the dingy computer lab. I am a first year Ph.D. student.

What an odd question, I think, completely forgetting that the distinctively brown sweatshirt I am wearing today says "Lehigh" on the front. *Yes... did you?*

Ah, the fourth American in our program.

We are sitting in the GIs office in Pittsburgh on our way down to ISA. *Thank God that Dean still has US health insurance*, I think to myself as I try to sit still under my expanding belly. Doctor House and his detectives enter the room:

I could correct him, but I won't because explaining the rules and regulations pertaining to marriage and divorce between two countries seems a bit outside of the purview of this appointment.

The patient comes to us today from a referral by Doctor Eric Schuller. The patient is 29 years old, 5'11", approximately 167 pounds, with no known allergies, and currently is not taking any medications. The patient has conveyed that he has been experiencing extreme lower back and abdominal pain for close to a decade now. The abdominal pain has been accompanied by extreme weight loss, poor circulation, and erratic and bloody bowel movements. Initial testing was performed in Canada in the form of an ultrasound that revealed a large, black mass in the upper right lobe of the liver. A follow-up MRI with contrast was conducted, which revealed seven tumors on the liver, ranging in size with the largest being the size of a grapefruit. His wife accompanies him and they are expecting a baby.

The patient has brought copies of these test results here today. The patient knows of no other health concerns. Although, he did mention that he lost vision in his left eye for over a week approximately four-years ago. No follow-up testing was performed during that time.

There is a one-year wait time to sponsor a spouse or common-law partner who lives in the country to receive permanent residence in Canada. Of course, The State has shown us in recent months that even when one waits patiently, that status can be taken away from certain bodies without warning. Today, we are not those bodies. There is a moratorium on sponsorship for permanent residence if you yourself have been sponsored in the last five years. There is a one-year cooling off period before a divorce can be finalized in Canada unless one spouse can prove abuse or infidelity. (The State does not consider it infidelity if the spouses were already separated or if both partners engaged in extra-marital relationships — one has to be at fault.) Typical gestation of a child lasts between 37 and 42 weeks. Neither chronic pain nor illness of the liver recognize any of these timelines. Pain ebbs and flows, wreaking havoc on the best-laid plans, often forcing bodies in motion into a state of suspended animation. While able-bodied time continues on a predictable trajectory, the time experienced by bodies in pain or bodies that are unwell melts into the earth.

[Where are those bodies?]

I know it is late and you have to work in the morning, but could you come over?

I need to ask you something and I don't want you to respond right away. Are you sure you want to be with me forever?

I pull out the white stick with its pink plus sign and hand it to him.

The sound of rapidly boiling water inside the teakettle nearly drowns out the beeping of an incoming text message. I gaze at my cell phone and it is Sarah. I quickly flick my thumb to open the message:

I nearly forget to turn off the teakettle as I grab the essentials and head out the door. After a brisk ten-minute walk in the biting Toronto air, I am at her house. We sit on her couch and, as an avid cinephile, I worry that this is a break-up scene in the making.

I take off my glasses and pause only for effect because, in my heart, I already know the answer unequivocally. I have always known the answer and I tell her, *Yes, you are the love of my life and I couldn't be more sure of it.*

I guess this really wasn't a breakup scene.

I am screaming. I am fucking
S C R E A M I N G in the
waiting room of the ER.

*HIS DOCTOR TOLD HIM TO COME TO THE
ER IMMEDIATELY. THIS MAN IS DYING AND
WHILE YOU TAKE OTHER PATIENTS ON
OHIP BACK, YOU WANT HIM TO FILL OUT
PAPERWORK AND PAY SOME EXORBITANT
FEE FIRST?*

[We can't leave again. She could come. She will
come.]

My pain is at a 10. I can barely move. I smell
like I am rotting from the inside out – a
yellowing carcass sweating under the florescent
lights. The ER nurse at St. Joseph's hospital in
Toronto asks me for my Ontario Health
Insurance Plan card. ~~For the fifth time I explain
that I am an international student and am not
covered under the provincial health care system.~~
I need pain pills. I need more of that morphine
that they gave me after the first surgery.

I should have never left the States in this
condition. Sarah is upset. She's in tears and
we're both frustrated and scared. I don't want
my daughter to know that I hurt this way.

Maybe we should drive back to Pittsburgh where
they will open me up from my navel, asking if
this mark accompanied me into this world.

To be eligible to study in Canada, you must prove: that you have enough money to pay for your tuition fees.

That you are a law-abiding citizen with no criminal record

You must be in good health and willing to complete a medical examination, if necessary.

And your living expenses and return transportation.

and that you are not a risk to the security of Canada. You may have to provide a police certificate.

You must satisfy an immigration officer that you will leave Canada at the end of your authorized stay.

It's nearly midnight and I'm sitting in the waiting room at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto. Dean's probably in the MRI machine right now. Most of the people here don't seem too concerned about what they're facing. Perhaps this is just how we let others see us or maybe they really aren't letting themselves get worked up. I've been so frustrated for days and there's no outlet. I just want to go for a run, but with the pregnancy, I'm exhausted. Instead, I sit around, furious with the world. How can it be that Dean and I finally found each other and now we're facing... What? Liver cancer? A cyst? Something we've yet to imagine? All the while, our baby is growing, getting ready to enter this world.

This room is so bright and my eyes can barely stay open. I'm strapped down as the nurses wheel me in — what are their names again? Why is it so cold in here? Where are my glasses? I think that one nurse has them. What was her name? I wonder if they can tell that I'm scared. The lights blur like headlights in the rain. The room smells still. *We need to move you now, Dean. On three: one, two, three. There you go.* I guess this is the table where I'll be cut open. There's that nurse again. She takes my left hand. *What does your tattoo mean?* My throat is bone dry. I think she asked me a question, again in her thick Pittsburgh dialect. *Sweetheart, you're doing great. That's Latin, right? What does it mean? Yinz guys know?* I fight the anesthesia plunging through every vein of my body to answer the question. My cracked, blistered lips peel open and I muster a response:

love of the world.

I want someone to blame, but there are only borders restricting our love, our movement, and our health care. We're battling a beast without a

form.

Thousands of miles in the air, on the road, searching for a pill, a procedure to rectify my ailing body. Crossing borders, descending into the darkness of a MRI machine, receding off into a chemically induced hypnotic unconscious state, all in preparation for a baptism by perforated flesh, shredded muscles that are stitched and glued back together in synthetic wholeness, and the extraction of over one pound of a band of tissue tasked with purifying the imperfections of the human body.

Tomorrow I will wake up with a foot pressed into my ribcage and tiny fists drumming on my hips. I will lay in bed with a full bladder, but I won't get up immediately. Something stalls me each morning. I do not want to leave my house, to engage with this world, because my world is disappearing. And tomorrow, before the sun rises, Dean will be awake in a hospital bed, preparing to have part of his liver removed, while I will lie in Toronto,

alone

, wondering if we said our final goodbyes when I dropped him off at the airport a few days ago, unable to cross into the US because I'm having fucking contractions.

do you have any drugs, alcohol, or weapons?

[no]

To whom is this vehicle registered?

[it's mine]

What is the purpose of your trip?

[medical]
[surgery]
[im in pain]
[i need to see my doctor]
[visiting family ☺]

Have either of you been convicted of a crime?

[NEVER – never for both of us]

WHERE WILL YOU BE STAYING?

[with family]

Do you have anything else to declare?

[not what you want to hear]

Don't you mean "visa?"

Regardless, are we going to the conference in Baltimore? Half the department has already withdrawn for various reasons, but in part because there is concern about the safety of crossing that border.

Okay... can I ask you a question?

We have both had an uncertain relationship with the idea of a home — me because I have moved so many times and the most obvious place that I would call home, Oregon, is a memory that I cannot tangibly access anymore. I go back and that desire to belong shows itself as nostalgia for something that no longer exists. We say that our home is wherever the three of us are together, but I for one have a longing for a physical space...

Kind of. I mean, I am not trying to compare having your parents lose their jobs and then living in a van to choosing to move, but I don't know how to disentangle our relationships with our homeland with the politics of an immigration ban.

In 643 days my student permit expires.

They don't issue visas to American students. The legal specificities around visas and permits are drastically different. And in turn, so are my legal rights.

I can't keep talking about this, Sarah. You know that I need to make and stick to plans. Either we're going or we're not.

Of course.

Are you asking me if because I've lost my home in the past, that I too long for an actual place to call home? Someplace beyond the limits of the room where our daughter entered this world?

I don't know, Sarah. Fuck, I mean in less than two years I have to move back.

But back to where?

We are sitting in the waiting area of the US Consulate in downtown Toronto with our five-week-old daughter. The building looks like an artifact from the Cold War Era and there are men with guns milling about outside – we cannot tell whether they are US military personnel or private security contractors. In a few months, protesters of Trump’s immigration ban will temporarily shut down the consulate.

I have just returned from changing a diaper in the women’s restroom. The men’s restroom does not have a changing table. Our daughter is hungry and I feel uncomfortable about breastfeeding on what is technically US soil even though I know that US law protects this act in federal buildings. I unbutton my shirt and no one bats an eye.

This is a joke, but it is one that we can make loudly because of what we look like and how we came to live outside of the US. They are calling us to the window. We collect our documents and records, including our daughter’s passport photos, and remember the hours it took to get an infant to sit still in front of a white backdrop with her eyes open, mouth closed, and ears visible. Her application indicates that she has blue eyes and is one foot 11 inches tall.

The former wine salesman turned Foreign Service Officer tells both of us to raise our right hands and swear that we will tell the truth. Given that there is neither a constitution nor a bible present, it is unclear on what we are swearing. President Obama’s framed portrait smiles at us as the FSO asks us whether we want to obtain our daughter’s citizenship through my birthright or Dean’s. After a lengthy round of questioning about every place I have lived since

This place looks like a primary school teacher decorated it. How many bulletin boards covered in clip art do you think they need to explain the Federal Voting Assistance Program to people?

Hey, call me from that phone so we can prank call the consulate later.

Yes, we are both US citizens.

turning 18, my finances, my love life, and my employment record, it appears that we have successfully satisfied the FSO. Our application will now be sent off to the State Department in a secured dossier for further inspection.

The FSO says that the process should not take long, which is a relief since the US government indicates that children of US citizens must travel under a US passport regardless of age or location of birth. As we leave the interview, the FSO says that we should consider careers in the Foreign Service.

How long do you think it will take for our daughter's citizenship and passport to arrive?

Our accommodations have a high window that overlooks a cat-strewn courtyard with grey cobblestones. At night the window allows light to stream in across our floor. Jet lag has a way of toying with one's sense of time and well being on the best of days, but when pregnant and trying to sort through potentially devastating news, it lends itself to an almost apocalyptic view of the world. We were diligent about only taking a brief nap when we landed here in Rome so that our sleep schedule was not shot for the entire duration of this conference. But even so, it is the middle of the night and I have woken up in a state of utter confusion. The calendar seems to lie.

I should finish preparing for my presentation tomorrow. Sarah is asleep and the glow of the television illuminates a small pocket of color in the corner of the room. I can't focus. I can't possibly sketch out notes right now on Habermas' intersubjective linguistic turn. I put my paper down and quietly dig through my bag looking for my pocket notebook. The cover sports a drawing of a brown and white dog. The spine reads: "D is for dog." It was a gift from Sarah. I grab hold of it and yank it from the side pocket. I sit on the edge of the bed looking at the illustration of the dog. It strikes me that the depiction of the dog is atypical — it looks nervous, uncertain, prepared to flee in a second. I open the notebook to the first page. Its emptiness unsettles me. I begin to write turning the ominous blankness into my dying wishes:

i, dean caivano, humbly request that the following wishes be faithfully honored. in the event of my death, i request that no catholic mass or service be held. i would like for my body to be incinerated and my ashes scattered at these various locations: 1) lake ontario, 2) the allegheny river, and 3) the lehigh river. if possible, i would like for my ashes to be distributed by sarah naumes and my daughter. beyond these events, i would like no service, gathering, wake, dinner, celebration, or memorial to be held.

I close the notebook and turn to Sarah.
She is still asleep.
I reach for the television remote.

You were born on a Saturday night on a mattress on the floor of our first home. We didn't go to the hospital, a place where we spent far too much time when you were in my womb. For 20 hours my body swayed under the pressure of a life entering this world, moaning for sanctuary. Those 20 hours lasted a lifetime and yet, the only moment that mattered was the end.

You entered silently in the shadow of your mother's cry. The three of us huddled together on the edge of the bed, in a small house on Macondo Avenue, as the midwives removed the sheets soaked in blood and quietly exited the room. We spoke softly, held you gently, and began to love you eternally. This was our beginning. Our departure, if even momentarily, from ailing bodies in suspended animation and our entry into a new world freed from boundaries for which we neither asked nor chose.

[A ~moment of freedom —

{a fleeting encounter}

at odds with the

omnipresent logic of

